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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 02731

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SUBJECT: REACTIONS TO RELEASE OF FEB
92 COUP LEADER HUGO CHAVEZ

REF: A) CARACAS 2512, B) CARACAS 2270

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: POLITICAL REACTION TO THE RELEASE OF THE PRINCIPAL LEADER OF THE FEBRUARY 1992 MILITARY COUP, LTC HUGO CHAVEZ, HAS RANGED FROM "GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY" TO WARNINGS THAT IT SENDS SIGNALS TO THE ARMED FORCES THAT IT CAN ACT WITH IMPUNITY. FOR HIS PART, CHAVEZ HAS EMBRACED THE PUBLIC SPOTLIGHT AND ACTIVELY TAKEN UP HIS NEW POLITICAL ROLE IN A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND PRONOUNCEMENTS. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF THE LEADER OF THE FEBRUARY 1992 MILITARY COUP (REF A), LTC HUGO CHAVEZ, VENEZUELAN NEWSPAPERS WERE FULL OF REACTIONS FROM POLITICAL LEADERS AND PREMONITIONS ON WHAT THE RELEASE WILL MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY. ONE OF THE FIRST TO STRONGLY CRITICIZE THE DECISION WAS ACCION DEMOCRATICA (AD) EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER EMILIO RONDON. ACCORDING TO RONDON, THE PARDON OF CHAVEZ AND OTHER COUP PARTICIPANTS WILL SIGNAL THE MILITARY THAT IT CAN ACT WITH IMPUNITY. HE SAID THAT RATHER THAN ESTABLISHING HARMONY AMONG MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES, THE PARDONS WILL BE AN IRRITANT TO THOSE MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES WHO DEFENDED THE GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY SINCE MANY OF THOSE WHO TOOK UP ARMS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT ARE NOW BEING HAILED AS NATIONAL HEROES.

¶3. (C) RONDON'S CONCERNS ABOUT DISQUIET IN THE MILITARY OVER THE PARDONS WERE SEEMINGLY CONFIRMED BY PRESS INTERVIEWS WITH UNNAMED CIVILIAN AND MILITARY MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY JUSTICE SYSTEM. THESE ANONYMOUS SOURCES SAW THE RELEASE OF THE COUP PARTICIPANTS AS A SIGN OF A LACK OF AUTHORITY AND WILLPOWER ON THE PART OF THE CALDERA ADMINISTRATION. (COMMENT: THAT SOME MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY COURT SYSTEM ARE LESS THAN HAPPY WITH THE PARDONS OF THE 1992 COUP PLOTTERS IS HARDLY SURPRISING -- THEY WOULD VIEW THE GRANTING OF PRE-TRIAL PARDONS AS THE JUDICIAL EQUIVALENT OF SWEEPING THE ISSUE OF THE REBELLION UNDER THE RUG AND THUS DAMAGING THE INTEGRITY OF THE MILITARY'S JUSTICE SYSTEM. MORE IMPORTANTLY, WE ARE NOT AWARE OF ANY SERIOUS SIGNS OF MILITARY DISCONTENT WITH THE POLITICAL DECISION TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM OF THE COUP PLOTTERS VIA PARDONS AND THEIR DISMISSAL FROM THE ARMED FORCES. END COMMENT)

¶4. (U) THE PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN COPEI PARTY, HILARION CARDOZO, SAID THE RELEASE OF THE COUP PARTICIPANTS WAS ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE INTEGRITY OF THE ARMED FORCES AS AN APOLITICAL AND NON-DELIBERATIVE INSTITUTION. HE SEES THE PARDONS AS A POSITIVE STEP FOR THE COUNTRY, AND CALLED ON CHAVEZ AND OTHER LEADERS OF THE COUP TO UTILIZE THE POLITICAL PROCESS, RATHER THAN ARMED INSURRECTION, TO EFFECT CHANGE.

¶5. (U) IN KEEPING WITH THE POPULIST SENTIMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE COUP PLOTTERS, THE ARCHBISHOP OF CARACAS JOSE ALI LEBRUN SAID THE PARDONS ARE "GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY" AND WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE SPIRIT OF PACIFICATION NEEDED IN VENEZUELA. HE AGREES WITH PRESIDENT CALDERA THAT THE RELEASE WILL HELP PUT THE "HOUSE IN ORDER".

¶6. (C) IN A RELATED ISSUE THAT WON'T SEEM TO GO AWAY, "MOVIMIENTO AL SOCIALISMO" (MAS) PARTY MEMBER LUIS MANUEL ESCULPI HAS ONCE AGAIN CALLED FOR A CONGRESSIONAL

INVESTIGATION INTO A TRIP MADE BY FORMER DEFENSE MINISTER RADEMES MUNOZ LEON (REF B). THE NEW CALL TO INVESTIGATE STEMS FROM CHARGES MADE BY CHAVEZ THAT MUNOZ WAS ON A MISSION TO THE US LAST SEPTEMBER TO SECURE THE NEUTRALITY OF THE USG IN THE EVENT OF A HIGH LEVEL COUP IN VENEZUELA. (COMMENT: CONGRESSIONAL DISINTEREST IN THIS ISSUE WILL ASSURE AN INVESTIGATION WILL NOT COME TO FRUITION. WE SEE THIS AS MAS, ONCE AGAIN, TRYING TO MAKE POLITICAL GAIN FROM THE SITUATION.)

17. (C) SINCE HIS RELEASE, CHAVEZ HAS BATHED IN THE POLITICAL SPOTLIGHT AND, THROUGH A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS, PRESS CONFERENCES, AND TRIPS, EMBRACED HIS NEW CIVILIAN, POLITICAL ROLE. IN AN APRIL 4 INTERVIEW, FOR EXAMPLE, HE CONTINUED HIS ACCUSATION THAT THEN DEFENSE MINISTER MUNOZ LEON WAS PLANNING A COUP IN LATE 1993, ALTHOUGH HE ADMITTED HE HAD NO PROOF. REACTING TO FORMER PRESIDENT CARLOS ANDRES PEREZ' RECENT STATEMENT THAT HE INTENDS TO RE-ENTER POLITICS AND MAY ONCE AGAIN SEEK THE PRESIDENCY (ONCE CLEARED BY THE SUPREME COURT), CHAVEZ WARNED THAT SHOULD CAP RETURN TO POWER HE AND HIS FOLLOWERS WOULD "FIGHT HIM FROM THE MOUNTAINS." HE ALSO SUGGESTED, RATHER STRANGELY, THAT MUNOZ AND CAP WERE SOMEHOW INVOLVED IN A SCHEME TO SURRENDER VENEZUELAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE GULF OF VENEZUELA TO COLOMBIA.

18. (C) COMMENT: A SHREWD AND EXPERIENCED POLITICIAN, CALDERA KNOWS THAT TIMING IS EVERYTHING. CHAVEZ WAS RELEASED ON THE SATURDAY BEFORE VENEZUELA SHUT DOWN FOR EASTER WEEK. THE PAPERS FROM SUNDAY TO WEDNESDAY AFTER THE RELEASE WERE FILLED WITH STORIES ON CHAVEZ, HIS POPULAR SUPPORT, AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES. THERE WERE NO NEWSPAPERS PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, AND THE CITY WAS EMPTY FOR EASTER SATURDAY AND SUNDAY. BY THE TIME PEOPLE RETURNED TO TOWN ON MONDAY, THE HEADLINES WERE BACK TO WHAT CONCERNS VENEZUELAN MOST; THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY. THE BIG STORY IS THE REOPENING OF BANCO LATINO.

19. (C) CHAVEZ, OF COURSE, INTENDS TO KEEP HIMSELF IN THE HEADLINES. HE IS CLEARLY CHARISMATIC AND ARTICULATE, AND DEFT AT USING HIS STATUS AS A HERO -- AT LEAST IN THE EYES OF SOME -- TO BUILD A POLITICAL MOVEMENT. HIS IDEOLOGY AS EXPRESSED IN VARIOUS INTERVIEWS, INCLUDING HIS ANTI-US BIAS AND HIS OPEN THREAT OF ANOTHER COUP ATTEMPT SHOULD CAP BE RE-ELECTED (AN UNLIKELY EVENT), REVEAL AN ESSENTIALLY PRIMITIVE AND FUNDAMENTALIST APPROACH. HE HAS BEEN PUBLICLY LABELLED AS A "CRETIN" BY AN INFLUENTIAL JOURNALIST, A VIEW WHICH IS SHARED BY MOST OF THE POLITICAL CLASS IN VENEZUELA. IT IS AN OPEN QUESTION WHETHER A CHAVEZ WITHOUT HIS RED BERET AND MARTYR STATUS WILL CONTINUE TO ATTRACT SIGNIFICANT POPULAR SUPPORT.

DAVIDOW